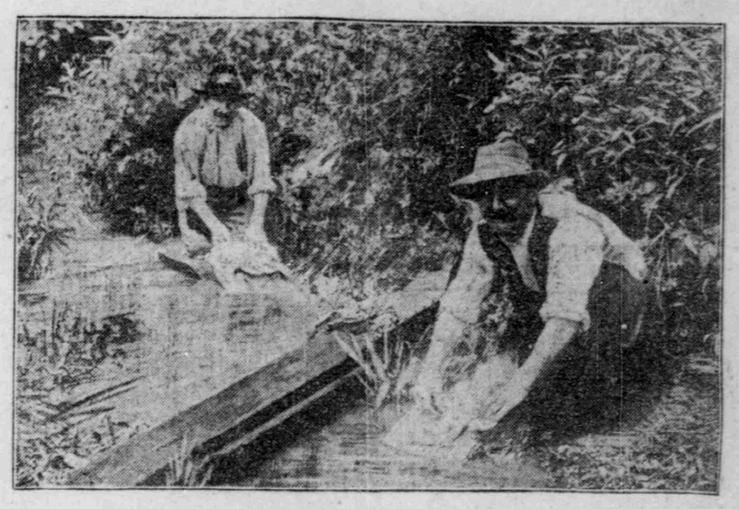
SCENES AT CAMP OF ITALIAN LABORERS AT BENNING

Strange Life of the Little Sicilians Who Are Pushing Through One of the Lines to the New Union Railway Station---How They Cook, Wash, Sleep, and Find Amusement Among Themselves---Pathos and Comedy of Their Existence.

The Campfire Chef Cooking Spaghetti.

A Little Game of Cards.



Every Man His Own Washwoman.

"YOU taka my picks? How much you pay?" says the first Italian you meet on the way to the camp of laborers who are laying one of the lines which will enter the new union station.

Beware, O stranger, O tenderfoot, how you give these men money. The query is a shrewd one. They do not ask you whether you will pay anything—that goes without saying—but how much, that is what they want to know. Hence, be on your guard, and tell the smiling picket firmly "Nothing." If you should be weak enough to give Angelo something to sit for his portrait, he will expect a "remembrance" before you leave the camp.

There are eighty-four Italians in this particular place, along the line of the steam road to Alexandria. They sleep in the box cars which brought them from Philadelphia, New York, and the great cities of the East, where they were gathered with great labor and expense. It is said that they are well paid, getting somewhere in the neighborhood of a dollar and a half for a day's work.

They are smiling little men, dark and swarthy, with thick black hair. They wear odd foreign-made clothes, and shoes with hob nails. These nails are set into the sole in all sorts of fantastic patterns, and each man prides himself on having a more artistic arrangement of nails than his fellow. The shoes with their inch soles clatter and clink about the stones of the camp as if each little man were a French peasant and wore wooden slippers.

Site of the Camp.

These Italians are encamped near their cars, like Arabs, adapting themselves to any circumstances. All they require is a level place with a bit of shade where tables may be placed, running water, and convenient spots for setting up fireplaces, where spaghetti is cooked in little tin kettles, blackened from long exposure to heat and smoke. The place they occupy just now is a good location to pitch a camp on and must have been chosen by an experienced man, possibly the "bauss," who has done work of this sort before.

A deep gulley, through which a little stream runs, is near at hand, shaded by trees and a thick undergrowth of bushes and long grass. This is where the Sunday washing is done. The little men come tumbling, helter-skelter, down the steep path, their washing under their arms, and, with many a shout and exclamation, set to work. They choose a smooth, sloping stone; lug it to the edge of the stream and begin to scrub like so many washerwomen. They are cleanly to a degree, and you can watch them scouring and soaking and wringing even their vests. When they start to work on the track Monday morning everything has been given a thorough scrubbing.

A Typical Camper.

Here comes a characteristic figure. The little fellow is short and thick-set, looking as if his bones were small but well padded with muscle. He wears a strip of faded red sash around his body, and gold earrings sparkle dully from his black hair. He is unshaven and unshorn, his shoes clatter on the stones, and as he stops for a moment to push a branch aside you can see the jaunty little brown cap on the side of his head. He carries a bottle in his hand—a bottle of American beer—and he is coming down to place it in the stream as a sort of natural ice box.

Above these strivers after cleanliness is the camp. Several long tables, made of great slabs of wood set on legs of unbarked trees, stand round and a chattering company is gathered about each. There are great earthenware dishes of beans, and spaghetti placed on the festive board, there are squat, round loaves of unleavened bread, and the banqueters pledge one another in beer a la naturel, from the bottle.

Here is a fireplace where the spaghetti is being cooked and served to the diners piping hot. It is made of bricks and a tiny fire burns within, a fire made of twigs and pieces of old railroad ties. A little kettle is swung over the fire, or, more often, placed right on it. The water boils merrily, while the chef stirs and dips, stirs and dips up the long strips of dough with a ladle made of sweet, clean pine. This particular chef, there are several, has large bold features, a thick shock of black hair, rings in his ears, and deep set black eyes. With a cloak thrown round him he would make an ideal witch, stirring a pot of some deadly brew for her enemy.

The Campers' Hotel.

The box cars which brought them from the north to their present scene of work stand on the track near at hand. They are set on high wheels and a flight of stairs leads up to the door of each. These box cars are fitted with berths for the Italians to sleep in. There are a dozen bunks to a car, six on a side. Each has a shelf at the foot where a man may keep his clothes and "belongings." It is a rough, cheerless place to sleep in. The bed is hard, made of the rudest materials, and after the car has been standing in the sun all day long, it must be wonderfully hot at night. The Italians, however, have drunk deep of that best sleeping potion, hard and tedious labor, and you would surprise Pietro if you asked him whether he was satisfied with his bed. He has a sheltered place to rest at night, his household gods—letters from home, pictures and keepsakes—are in the box under his bunk, and what more could heart desire?

This old box car is a veteran tramp, a "Dusty Rhodes" of many years' standing. He has the fever of the wanderer in his blood and he must travel on and on until he dies. He belongs far south, somewhere near the Mississippi River, and he has been away from home for a long while. Still this Dusty Rhodes is not at all homesick, for he prefers this roving life to any other. He would rather stop where the scenery is pretty and where there is running water than live the hustling, rustling life of his brothers who are in the regular freight business. They carry nothing more valuable than soap, sewing machines, and possibly an occasional plow; "perishable and immediate," it is true, but not as important as his cargo. He is a pioneer, a ship of the desert, as it were, and he carries living freight, which always gives a car standing, no matter what yard he may be shunted into.

A Corner Grocery in a Corner.

There is a well-equipped corner grocery store in one of the cars. It has a liberal supply of candies, soap, spaghetti, flour, corncob pipes, and what the storekeeper calls "miskulanies." There is elbow room in plenty for him and he can use his scales without being disturbed, but one buyer has to come out of the little shop before another can get in. Whether this arrangement was suggested by the strategy of the storekeeper or was made necessary by the size of the car it is hard to say. At any rate, the shop does a rushing business, and can provide 'Tista with almost anything his simple needs may require. It is very seldom that the men question any price; it is not necessary in this store, but it has been arranged that they should have the trustfulness of little children in those in authority, and especially in the "bauss," to the end that they may be good workmen, good followers, and pliable tools in the hands of the all-powerful railroad.

The Letter Writer.

Here is Marzio writing a letter home. He has picked out a pile of clean railroad ties, arranged them in the form of a rude desk and seat and is writing away, taking as much pains with each word as if it were an entire letter in itself. He is using pen and ink as if he were accustomed to them and had had some practice in their manipulation. His writing master had taught him that it was bad form to attempt to make a letter, in fact that the great penmen believe it quite impossible to do so, unless the writer reclined his head on his left arm while his right is at work. This, it is said, imparts great ease and depth of meaning to the style, and it is an established fact that Dante himself declared if he had known the advantages of this method he would have used it in the composition of the "Divina Comedia."

The best artists of the pen are not satisfied with resting the head on the left arm so as to keep the eyes at the level of the right hand, but they go a step further. They employ a certain twist of the lip and even a motion of the eye for every letter. Marzio follows these maestros of the pen very closely, and his letter, when completed, is a work of art. But whatever method he employs you may be sure that what he is saying comes straight from the heart. You can read that much on his face. He is telling the folks at home, his sweetheart, mayhap, what he thinks of the new country. God knows what he expected to find here—money and place and pleasure for the asking, like the poor Irish colleens who thought to pick up gold in the streets. Marzio has found by this time that the primal curse is working on this side of the water as well as on t'other, that we have to earn our bread with labor and suffering.

Suddenly a giant passenger locomotive whips by with a glittering string of Pullmans behind. As you look, the red flag and the flashing nickel hand-rail have already become indistinct. Who knows whether Marzio tells his folks that he is writing within twenty feet of such prodigies as this?

The Card Players.

From the top of this pile of lumber come shouts of laughter and a sputtering and crash of words like a Hotchkiss rapid-fire in action, ending with a single explosive which sounds horrible until the "bauss" at your elbow says that it means "sword of flame." They are playing the odd Italian card game, which is a nightmare of undigested and misunderstood euchre, whist, and draw poker. The players sit on their feet like so many tailors, holding long-stemmed corncobs between their teeth and talking and shouting as if their lives were at stake. Each player has a following of henchmen, who add a "halloo" in shrill Italian every time he makes a good play. There are no stakes, but they play, like good men and true, for the pleasure of the game, for the excitement of the contest, and the keen joy of being opposed to one another.

In the crowd about the card table is the fellow who plays an accordion. The stranger who comes to the camp with a prejudice will be surprised to hear an aria of Verdi coaxed out of this battered old instrument. It has a decided leak somewhere, but such is the skill of the performer that it is seldom apparent. Suddenly the accordion player sweeps into a familiar waltz, and the volatile little men take up the air in their shrill voices.

These little fellows are good workmen, they can stand the trying work they are doing hour after hour. The heat they are accustomed to, and they have patience inexhaustible. Strong, biddable men they are, and it is said that they will put a railroad down as quick as any other gang you can hire. As a rule they have not borne the best of reputations, and the average citizen thinks of them as holding their own and other men's lives extremely cheap, of being disorderly and not desirable citizens. You will be surprised if you go to this camp to find such quiet, pleasant-speaking men. They have not exactly parlor manners, but then what would you expect of their surroundings and manner of life?

It has been said that some Italian laborers, if caught by the noon whistle with their picks aloft, will drop them over their backs, instead of sinking them in the earth. That is as it may be, but the men in the camp are not of the type. They have a reputation for industry, and they ably sustain it, as the boss will tell you. They are short and sturdy, Sicilians to a man. We rarely see the Piedmontese in this country, the tall, athletic northerners who compose the King of Italy's giant bodyguard.

Theirs is a different civilization from ours, and we are unable to take it in. Progress in the money-getting art does not necessarily mean progress in the real sense of the word. It is hard to understand how a million dollars and nine tailors cannot make a man, but it is none the less a fact. Not that these little Sardinians and Sicilians, with their Mafia and Camorra, are the best citizens that ever crossed the water to this country, but that there is at least some good in them, more than the average of prejudice is always willing to admit. These are threadbare truths, but if you will look abroad you will see that they have not yet been learned by heart.

COPY OF A RARE OLD NEWSPAPER

Heroes rise, and many heroes fall,
But still, the same advice applies to all—
Take ale, or wine, or any other drink,
So you avoid the deadly printer's ink.
—Unpublished Ballads of W. Shakespeare.

WHAT is more worthless than the newspaper after you've read it? You throw the printed sheet aside like a nutshell after the kernel is eaten; the very sight of the familiar page is nauseating and you catch yourself repeating advertisements and the news items over and over again like a memory lesson. It is the hardest work in the world to read this paper over again. You can imagine a prisoner in solitary confinement doing it, but no one else.

Think, too, of what becomes of yesterday's newspaper. Uncle Tom will tear it up and twist it into "spills" to light his briar with; it is pressed into service for Bobbie's kite; Maria Ann uses it to start the fire o' mornings; it is sometimes made to do substitute duty for a pane of glass in windows, and who can guess how many bundles are wrapped in it! Altogether, you will agree that yesterday's newspaper is about as valuable as the hat that has long since gone out of fashion. Still, here is a newspaper on the desk before us that was issued a great many yesterdays ago. You would think people should be paid to look at it, but, strange to say, it is increasing in value every day, and its owner intends to place it in a frame for safe keeping.

Tear off a page of The Times and hold it so that the top and bottom meet. The "Ulster County Gazette," printed in New York State, December, 1799, is just this size. Heavy black lines encircle every article. This is newspaper mourning, and the "Gazette," unhappily, had the best of reason for wearing it, since George Washington's funeral notice appears on the little pages. The letters are still clear, but the paper is steadily turning browner and browner. Round splotches of a darker color than the rest of the page appear all over the paper, and the old "Gazette" breathes forth the musty, pungent odor of decaying paper and ink. During its century of life it has gradually grown softer, so that today it will fold and crumple in the hand like a handkerchief. If you hold the venerable newspaper for a while and read its droll advertisements, you seem to fade away and become a stout Dutch farmer with a long clay pipe between your teeth, leather breeches and square-toed shoes; the old paper will begin to look fresh and new, and the desk broadens out into a huge fireplace, covered with blue tiles and a giant back-log blazing merrily on the great brass dogs.

The lamentation over Washington has the right ring, despite the stiff and solemn fashion of expressing it.

A young lady bemoans his death in the following "lines," striking her maiden harp not loudly but with becoming tenderness:

Weep, kindred mortals; weep! No more you'll find
A man so fuft, so pure, so firm of mind.
Rejoicing angels, hail the heavenly sage!
Celestrial spirits, greet the wonder of the age!

President John Adams received an address of condolence from a body of the prominent citizens of Washington, and said in reply:

"I receive with most refpectful and affectionate sentiments in this impreffive address the obliging expreffions of open regret for the loss our Country has sustained in the death of her moft, efteemed, beloved and admired CITIZEN. * * * His example is now complete and it will teach wifdom and virtue to Magiftrates, Citizens and men not only in the prefent but in future generations as long as our Hiftory shall be read. If a Trojan found a Pliny, a Marcus Aurelius can never want Biographers, Eulogifts or Hiftorians."

We can imagine the venerable President, his square-hewn face expressing the utmost sorrow, replying to the delegation of periwigged citizens in pompous, cumbersome phrase. He must have loosened his cravat very often when he was speaking.

General Washington's funeral cortege is described in a letter from a correspondent, beginning as follows:

"George Town, Dec. 20, 1799.

"On Wednesday last the mortal part of Washington the Great, the Father of His Country and the Friend of Man, was assigned to the toomb with solemn honors and funeral pomp." An accurate plan of the parade as it marched is given and the letter closes with appropriate expressions of the popular affliction.

The grim black outlines of this old paper inclose a magic glass. Through it you can watch, darkly, it is true, but with a certain degree of clearness, short scenes from the mighty drama of History. Some famous actors appear, thrown into relief by the smaller ones. As is proper in plays, there is the moving undercurrent of action, of war on land and sea, of the passing of a great man, and just a dash of clumsy humor to keep the rest sweet and pure.

So, if you look intently at this mirror under "Latest Foreign" you will see that "the army of the Rhine has conquered all before it, retaken Markheim and Frankfort and killed 300 of the enemy. Ten thousand peasants who rose in a mass have thrown down their arms. Among the prisoners is a whole company of Cossacks. The army of the Rhine is now in possession of the whole line of Mentz, Markheim and Frankfort."

You can see a gorgeous general in a gold-laced coat and cocked hat ride up and down the ranks of the surrendering peasants, twisting his fierce little mustache the while. Artillerymen in red coats and tall hats, a bright buckle on the band, stand unmoved beside their smoking guns, erect and soldierly, holding their ramrods ready in their left hands. Think of loading and firing a gun in a high hat. Here are the Cossacks in astrakhan caps and capes, closely guarded by two companies of troopers mounted on dappled-gray horses and wearing great jack-boots with broad flaps across the instep. Powder-marked pistols peep from their holsters and the long black tail of their hair escapes from under the small three-cornered hat.

The next scene is laid in Paris. Bonaparte and Berthier have disembarked at Frejus. The fame of their conquest has preceded them and the volatile people crowd around the horse which the First Consul rides. The conquerer of the pyramids sits immovable, his dark eyes moving constantly over the faces around him. He looks pale and thin, more like a divinity student than a soldier, and the hot sun of Egypt had but little effect upon his skin. Berthier rides behind, and the tri-color is everywhere.

You can see the British packet Falmouth bobbing sullenly at the New York wharf. It is a wonder she has been able to make the trip across, she seems so deep in the water and there is so little life to her rise. Her captain has a letter from the Archduke Charles of Austria, which is printed in the "Gazette." His highness writes with many a flourish under the signature:

"Field Marshal Swarrow has defeated the enemy at Glarus and taken 1,000 prisoners. The enemy's loss in killed and wounded was very considerable." Old Swarrow is again victorious and will add another decoration to the string across his coat.

This is another notice:

"A quantity of Schobary peas for sale, or will be exchanged for wheat.

"JOHN TEMPER.

"December 28, 1799."

This is another, with a suggestion of a comedy or a tragedy behind it, mayhap:

"Jacob Elmendorff, of the town of Marbletown, in the county of Ulster, in the State of New York, is dead, and Gerritie Van Keuren and Gerritt Van Keuren are named as administratrix and administrator."

What has become of the Van Keurens now? Did they hasten old Jacob's death by carelessly plucking a pillow from under his head at an opportune time? Van Keuren—the name sounds a bit as if they might be somewhat close, watching every pfennig. Vrow Van Keuren might have been a buxom lass when she was young, but she is probably stout and wears a double chin now.

Luther Andres, a genius in the line of drawing attention to his store, if there ever was one, advertises in verse. He says:

Luther Andres has been opening GOODS both
fresh and gay;
He has received near every kind that you can
find in any store.
And as he purchases by the bale,
He is determined to retail
For READY PAY and a little lower
Than ever have been had before.
I would not live to rouse your passions,
For CREDIT here is out of fashion.
You always may find me by my sign,
A few rods from the House Divine.

The following articles will be received in payment: Wheat, rye, buckwheat, oats, corn, butter, flax, ashes, and rawhides.

CASH will not be refused.

Shopkeeper Andres' muse seems to be a little lame. Perhaps she could not overcome the obstacle of Andres' writing out her verses with a nubby pen in the back of an old account book.

Here is another notice:

"Came to the subscriber a young HIEFER one year old last spring, with a piece cut off her right ear, a star in her forehead and white under the belley. The owner by paying charges is desired to take her away. SETH MOSER."

WHEN THE FAMILY IS AWAY

THE colonel has been in the real estate business ever since the mustering out of 1865. He has a cozy little office downtown, fitted wth old-fashioned mahogany desks and soft red carpets. Altogether it is a very comfortable office and it has many customers, for the colonel knows every phase of the real estate business in Washington.

The other day he was walking with a friend up one of the prettiest streets in the northwest section of the city, to get a breath of air after his day's work. "I suppose," remarked his friend, "that two-thirds of the brightest and most comfortable houses in Washington are practically vacant from the middle of June to the 1st of October."

"Probably three-fourths would be a nearer guess," replied the colonel.

"I expect there must be thousands of dollars in rentals lost during the summer."

"Yes. I rented Mrs. Cathcart's house the other day. She is at Newport for the hot season. I fancy there are persons who would be glad to rent some of these big houses, too.

"Have you ever thought," continued the colonel, who is a tender-hearted man, "have you ever thought how many people, who live in tenement houses and overcrowded huts, would be glad to give up their balcony sleeping rooms for the privilege of looking after these houses when their owners are away?

An Intelligent Charity.

"I have. And it's enough to make a man sick on sultry nights when he thinks of these great, airy bedrooms here in Washington, shut up and useless when the poor are suffering. I have an acquaintance in the Diplomatic Corps who tried the experiment last year of turning his house over to a family of deserving poor. He had a large, comfortable house, just off a fashionable street. In his position he received many calls for help from his countrymen in the city. He chose a family from among them, honest, and cleanly people they were, but, of course, they had never lived in such a house. Still, this did not deter my friend and he gave over his house without sruple or uneasiness. He came back in the fall, and, would you believe it, found the house in almost the same condition in which it had been left."

"You don't mean it? I know of several families who give up their houses during the summer to decent poor people whose habits and intelligence they know. They are often poor relations or old servants who often leave a house the sweeter for their presence. The great drawback in getting persons of this kind is, however, that they have comfortable homes already. Then, too, the hardest people to help are those who need help most. Aha! I see the Woodruffs are still in town; their house is open yet."

The Father of the Family Left Behind.

"No," said his friend with a laugh, "they're enjoying the sea air by this time. Old Woodruff is still in the city and I understand that he's half afraid to stay in the house. There he is at the window in shirt sleeves and smoking a cigar. It's easy to see that Madam Woodruff is from home. He's nodding to us."

"Well, do you blame the old fellow for not wishing to sleep in a vacant house? I don't. It's an unpleasant thing to enter any such dwelling. Your key makes such a noise in the lock, there's a musty smell when you get in, the very furniture looks different, and you can hear the slightest sound—even the stairs creaking on the top floor. It takes all kinds of nerve, as they say, to sleep in your own house when the family is away for the summer.

"That reminds me. Did you ever hear of young Wallace Latimer's experience some years ago? No. Well, he married old General Aylward's daughter some five years ago, you may remember. Latimer hadn't been living on Kenesaw Avenue more than a few weeks when his wife and two-year-old boy went up to Sea Girt for the summer. He was trying to make a reputation for himself at his office and his mind was wrapped up in work so you'll not be surprised to hear that one morning he went down to the city, leaving his bunch of keys on his shaving stand.

A City Man's Adventure.

"He had a hard day's work at his desk and he didn't think of those keys until he stood face to face with his own street door at 11 o'clock that night, and then he remembered where he had left them. He had carefully closed every door and window so that the house was as tight shut as a safe. Latimer is a quiet young fellow and he didn't care to let the neighbors see his distress, so he crept around the back way, turning up his collar as he went, intending to "jump" the fence and force a kitchen window.

"There happened to be a particularly zealous copper on the beat that night and just as Latimer had clambered to the top of the fence a hand gripped him by the leg and a voice said: 'Here! Come down out o' that!'

"Latimer turned round and looked at the end of the policeman's big night stick. 'Come down!' said the copper, savagely. 'I've been watching ye.' Latimer tried to explain from the top of the fence, but the policeman wouldn't accept it, and finally marched him down the street before all the neighbors, Latimer's collar in one hand and the club in the other.

"Latimer is a quiet fellow, as I said, but the idea of this outrage drove him nearly frantic. When the policeman stopped to telephone for the patrol wagon he tore out of his grasp and ran. Down the street they raced, Latimer flying on ahead and the policeman close on his heels. The neighbors cheered and urged on each man. It was very exciting until Latimer tripped and the copper caught him. There was a lively fight for a moment, but the policeman used his club freely and Latimer finally surrendered. Back to the watch box they marched, with a goodly following of jeering youngsters. Latimer's clothes were torn and his eye was blacked from his scuffle with the officer.

"'Oh!' said a lady with an unnecessarily loud voice. 'He looked like a hardened criminal before, but now I know he is one.'

Latimer was taken to the station and his collateral was cheerfully accepted by the desk sergeant, who happened to know him. The officer, he was told, was a new man. Latimer was mad as a hornet, and he had to go to a friend's house to spend the night. He forced the front door of the house next morning to get a change of clothing and moved from that neighborhood within a week."

"Aha," said the colonel's friend "there's a deal more to a house closed for the summer than one would think at first sight."